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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the effect of the telelvision drama "The Day After" on attitudes toward (1) defense spending, (2) a nuclear freeze, (3) nuclear disarmament, (4) the likelihood of war, (5) the severity of such a war, (6) personal political efficacy on the issue of war and peace, and (7) the likelihood of nuclear war under the presidency of Ronald Reagan or Walter Mondale. Nationwide telephone interviews were conducted on the evening of the broadcast--510 prior to and 418 following the broadcast. The survey results indicated that the program did not alter the percentage of viewers who supported or opposed a mutual nuclear freeze, nor did it change the proportion opposed to unilateral disarmament. There was no indication of any alteration in attitudes about the severity or likelihood of nuclear war. When controlled for age, education, sex, and political party affiliation, the data still revealed no marked attitudinal shifts. There was, however, a statistically significant fluctuation in the image of President Ronald Reagan, surprisingly in his favor. Nearly 47% on the pretest and 58% on the posttest refused to label either Reagan or presidential candidate Walter Mondale as more likely to preside over a nuclear war. Apart from this increased reluctance to link Reagan with nuclear war, the broadcast produced no significant evidence of changed attitudes or behavior. (HTH)

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BEFORE AND AFTER "THE DAY AFTER"

A NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF A MOVIE'S IMPACT

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WASHINGTON, D.C., MAY, 1984

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BEFORE AND AFTER "THE DAY AFTER": A NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF A MOVIE'S POLITICAL IMPACT

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Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, May 27, 1984, San Francisco, California

Sunday evening, November 20th, 1983, over 80 million Americans watched "The Day After," ABC-TV's drama about the horror and devastation of nuclear war. It was one of the most-watched and most-debated dramatic programs in television history.

Nuclear-freeze advocates such as the director of the Campaign Against Nuclear War praised the program as "a 7 million dollar advertising job for our issue." Some conservatives denounced the movie as "blatant political propaganda." Meanwhile, White House strategists worked to minimize any damage the show might do to President Ronald Reagan's defense policies, and the Secretary of State was dispatched to present an immediate televised response.

One TV critic predicted that the movie, as a "shared national experience," would "touch our emotions, our attitudes and our hopes for the future." He added (Shales, 1983):

> No one will be able to forget it....As has rarely happened in television history, a work of fiction has achieved the urgency and magnitude of live coverage of a national crisis....The actual impact will probably be...a pervasive shading of popular attitudes toward nuclear weaponry in general and the Reagan administration's New Brinkmanship in particular.

The advance billing was that "The Day After" would be a compelling drama that could create a "pervasive" shift in public attitudes. If this was to be a turning point in the national consciousness, it was important to measure the degree and character of that change.

Our study was designed to assess the effect of "The Day After" on a variety of subjects, including attitudes toward the following: (1) defense spending, (2) a bilateral nuclear freeze, (3) unilateral nuclear disarmament, (4) the likelihood of nuclear war, (5) the severity of nuclear war, (6) personal political efficacy on the issue of war and peace, and (7) the likelihood of nuclear war under the presidency of Ronald Reagan or Walter Mondale. We also appraised behavioral change by examining public communication to the White House, Congress, ABC network, counseling services, and anti-nuclear groups. "The Day After," we discovered, produced a surprising pattern of reactions.

METHODOLOGY

On the evening of the broadcast, we conducted random nationwide telephone surveys both before and after "The Day After." Working with Smith, Berlin & Associates, a Washington polling firm, and several dozen student volunteers, we surveyed a total of 928 people.

Our short questionnaire consisted of a dozen key attitudinal and demographic questions. Calling began about ninety minutes before the start of "The Day After" in each time zone. We interviewed only those people who said they were about to watch the program, and who were 17 years or older. (Most 17-year olds would be eligible to vote in November 1984.) Thanks to the enormous audience, brief questionnaire, and intense public interest in the subject, we were able to complete 510 pretest interviews.

A separate posttest sample was surveyed to obtain posttest data that would not be sensitized by the pretest questions. Telephoning began the minute "The Day After" ended in each time zone and continued for about 45 minutes. People who had not seen the drama were screened out.

The questionnaire was identical to that used for the pretest, with the addition of an inquiry as to whether respondents had been watching the special "Nightline" discussions about the movie. Viewers were eager to describe their opinions and refusals were unusually infrequent (under 5 percent). We completed 418 posttest interviews.

Random selection of subjects resulted in pretest and posttest groups that were highly similar in their demographic composition. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups on any of the available variables (age, sex, education, region, and party identification). Scores of the pretest group could thus serve as baseline measures against which to contrast the scores of their counterparts in the posttest group.

ATTITUDE STABILITY: DEFENSE POLICY, NUCLEAR WAR, AND EFFICACY

Those who had predicted that "The Day After" would produce at least a short-term bonanza in additional anti-nuclear sentiment among the general public were completely wrong. Even with our sizeable sample, we were unable to detect even a trivial shift on key questions. There were no statistically significant changes on any of the questions about defense policy or nuclear war.

Defense policy. Table 1 presents responses to the initial three questions. Opinions toward current defense spending were unchanged. Both before and after the movie, about 37-39 percent said "too much" was being spent, while about 16-17 percent said "too little."

Three-fourths of those surveyed already favored a mutual freeze on nuclear weapons before they witnessed "The Day After." There was no significant change afterwards. Before the show, only 14 percent were opposed to a mutual freeze -- about the same share as previous national surveys had found. After the show, the fraction was almost identical.

Just as Americans overwhelmingly supported a mutual nuclear freeze, they overwhelmingly opposed unilaterial nuclear disarmament. In the pretest, only 12 percent said they would unilaterially scrap all U.S. nuclear weapons; in the posttest, the proportion was 11 percent. Americans were opposed to one-sided nuclear disarmament by a ratio of 8 to 1 prior to the program. The imagery of a nuclear holocaust did not dislodge that opposition.

Nuclear war. Many people had speculated that "The Day After" would, at a minimum, convince Americans of the terror and slaughter of a thermonuclear war. Others predicted its graphic depiction would also increase fears that the movie was a premonition of a real future. We found no indication, however, of any alteration in attitudes about the severity or likelihood of nuclear war.

TABLE 1: DEFENSE ARMAMENTS ATTITUDES
BEFORE AND AFTER "THE DAY AFTER"

Do you think current U.S. government spending on the military and national defense is too much, too little, or about the right amount?

(Not significant)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Too much	38.6	36.7
Too little	16.3	17.2
About right	34.1	31.3
(Uncertain)	11.0	14.8

Would you support or oppose an agreement for both the U.S. and the Soviet Union to freeze nuclear weapons at current levels?

(N.S.)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Support	75.9	78.7
Oppose	14.3	13.2
(Uncertain)	9.8	8.1

Would you support or oppose a plan for the United States to scrap all U.S. nuclear weapons -- regardless of what the Soviet Union does?

(N.S.)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Support	12.0	10.8
Oppose	81.2	83.5
(Uncertain)	6.9	5.7

(Pretest N = 510; Posttest N = 418)

TABLE 2: NUCLEAR WAR ATTITUDES
BEFORE AND AFTER "THE DAY AFTER"

In your opinion how likely is a full-scale nuclear war within the next ten years?

(N.S.)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Extremely likely	10.4	12.4
Somewhat likely	34.5	34.9
Somewhat unlikely	32.5	28.9
Extremely unlikely	16.1	15.8
(Uncertain)	6.5	7.9

If there were a nuclear war, what do you think would be your chance of living through it?

(N.S.)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
A good chance	0.8	2.6
About 50-50	11.6	11.5
A poor chance	35.1	36.4
No chance at all	47.1	44.5
(Uncertain)	5.5	5.0

(Pretest n = 510; posttest n = 418).

As shown in Table 2, those surveyed in the pretest were just as pessimistic about their chances of surviving a nuclear war as were those who had seen the ABC program. Before the movie, 47 percent said they had absolutely no chance of living through a nuclear war. After the movie, the figure was 45 percent, a statistically insignificant difference.

Watching the atomizing of Lawrence, Kansas, also produced no shift in the proportion of those who thought a "full-scale nuclear war" was likely within the next ten years. Before the show, 45 percent said it was likely. Following the drama, 47 percent thought it was likely, a statistically insignificant difference.

Political efficacy. Before "The Day After" was aired, some commentators guessed that it might stimulate grass-roots parti-

cipation in the nuclear freeze movement, while other supposed it would spread feelings of helplessness toward such colossal issues. The latter idea would be consistent with findings of Michael Robinson (1976) and others that television messages often inflate the viewer's sense of frustration, confusion, and powerlessness.

"The Day After" neither discouraged nor promoted feelings of personal political efficacy. Table 3 reports reactions to the statement: "There is nothing I can do to influence war or peace." Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed disagreed with the statement both before and after the drama. (Again, differences were not statistically significant.)

TABLE 3: PERSONAL POLITICAL EFFICACY
BEFORE AND AFTER "THE DAY AFTER"

Would you agree or disagree with this statement: There is nothing I can do to influence war or peace.

(N.S.)	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Agree	30.2	26.8
Disagree	63.0	67.9
(Uncertain)	6.9	5.3

SUBGROUP SIMILARITY

Having found none of the expected changes in the aggregate, we turned to an examination of major demographic and political subgroups. Perhaps "The Day After" was particularly powerful for younger adults (thought to have been especially vulnerable to its appeals), for women (often more dovish than men), or for Democrats and Independents (because Republicans may have heeded conservative warnings).

When controlling for age, education, sex and party identification, however, the data still revealed no marked attitudinal shifts. Table 4 presents typical patterns. Attitudes toward defense spending, among all of the subgroups, were essentially unchanged. Even using a more generous chi-square probability level of .10, none of the before-and-after changes within subgroups in Table 4 were statistically significant.

Attitudes before and after "The Day After" on six issues (defense spending, nuclear weapons freeze, unilateral nuclear disarmament, likelihood of nuclear war, severity of nuclear war, and personal political efficacy on the issue of war) were examined separately for all nine subgroups (men, women, college, non-college, age 17-29, age 30 and over, Democrats, Independents, Republicans). None of these 54 crosstabulations showed any significant pretest-posttest differences at the .05 level. (1) Thus, there was no evidence that "The Day After" notably influenced any one subgroup more than it did the general population.

TABLE 4: PERCENT SAYING "TOO MUCH" DEFENSE SPENDING

	Pretest	Posttest	
Men	31.4	32.7	n.s
Women	44.6	41.1	n.s.
College	43.0	39.7	n.s.
Non-college	33.2	30.9	n.s.
17 - 29	46.3	44.4	n.s.
30 and over	34.9	32.6	n.s.
Democrats	48.5	46.7	n.s.
Independents	36.1	37.4	n.s.
Republicans	27.1	24.2	n.s.

WARMONGERS AND PRESIDENTS

Up to this point, we have seen consistency and stability in opinions. There was, however, one area in which we unexpectedly found a statistically significant fluctuation. That area was the image of Ronald Reagan.

Republican strategists had feared that the movie might boost pacifistic feeling and jeopardize President Reagan's military budget, foreign policy tactics, and ever damage his re-election chances. As a Washington Post editorial put it:

> The feeling is that the film's attempt at portraying nuclear war will lead many people to question President Reagan's commitment to arms control and, in a general way, to peace.

The Post went on to argue bluntly:

> The White House is awfully dumb, however, to be whipping up a counterattack against this program. There is no better way to seem implicitly to validate the doubts many people have about Ronald Reagan's nuclear proclivities.

As it turned out, there was a statistically significant shift on the subject of Reagan and nuclear war. In sharp contrast to the worry at the White House and the hopes of Democrats, the change was actually in Ronald Reagan's favor.

We asked the following question: "Do you think a major nuclear war would be more likely if the President were Ronald Reagan or Walter Mondale?" After TV's vision of the apocalypse, the share of people pointing to Reagan as the more dangerous President declined significantly from 36 to 27 percent. Mondale's proportion stayed virtually the same (17 to 15 percent). (See Table 5 and endnote 2.)

Also, suprisingly, a large plurality of the respondents refused to accept the forced-choice alternatives. Nearly 47 percent on the pretest and 58 percent on the posttest refused to label either Reagan or Mondale as more likely to preside over a nuclear war.

TABLE 5: NUCLEAR WAR AND THE PRESIDENT

Do you think a major nuclear war would be more likely if the President were Ronald Reagan or Walter Mondale?

	PRETEST	POSTTEST
Ronald Reagan	36.1	27.3
Walter Mondale	16.9	15.1
No Difference (vol.)	47.1	57.7
Sig. prob.> .005	(N = 510)	(N = 418)

Neither Reagan nor Mondale are mentioned in the script of the show. Why should there be a 25 percent drop in the proportion of people believing nuclear war more likely under Reagan? Although the decreased criticism of Reagan was more pronounced among men, the college-educated, Independents, and those under 30, his ratings improved in every demographic subgroup.

We can suggest two explanations. It may well be that many of those who would have -- perhaps casually -- linked Reagan to nuclear war before "The Day After" might have seen that charge as excessive, overly partisan, and slanderous after being reminded of the slaughter and suffering that would soon follow any launching of ICBMs. Accordingly, they may have tempered their evaluations.

A second possibility is that the program may have artificially produced a version of the "rally-round-the-flag" effect often noted during international crises. In the wake of the movie's ersatz hostilities, some citizens may have been less willing to criticize the Commander-in-Chief.

In the posttest, nearly six out of ten respondents rejected the implicit premise of the question and denied that either man as President might be culpable for the onset of the kind of carnage they had just seen dramatized on televisions. Respondents sometimes volunteered that no American president would initiate such a conflict and that if war broke out it would be due to the Russians or to "circumstances" beyond the control of the president.

All of this did not mean that Reagan was invulnerable on the campaign issues of peace. However, chalking up another score for "unanticipated consequences" of mass media messages, Reagan's problems in that area were not exacerbated by "The Day After" and appear to have been, at least temporarily, partially assuaged.

AGENDA AND ARMAGEDDON

Although "The Day After" did not disrupt existing views on defense or nuclear war, perhaps it stimulated concern over foreign policy belligerence and arms control talks. Issue salience is one attitudinal dimension that was not included in our national surveys, but Gallup surveys are available.

After early 1973 and the end of an active American role in Vietnam, people rarely told Gallup interviewers that the "most important problem facing the country today" concerns foreign affairs, national defense, arms control, international tension, or dangers of war. Through most of the 1970s, fewer than one in

ten named such issues. Aside from a one-time only hostage-related surge in early 1980, no more than 18 percent ever mentioned international relations or peace issues during the 1980s, prior to the fall of 1983.

In 1983, as Marine combat in Lebanon escalated, public concern grew steadily. In July, only 16 percent metioned international problems or the threat of war. In early October, the share increased to 23 percent. By the November 19-21 survey, a few weeks after U.S. intervention in Grenada and the loss of 238 Marines in Beruit, the figure grew to 37 percent. By the next survey in February, the number was down again to 28 percent.

This pattern is so consistent with international events that it is impossible to disentangle any separate contribution from "The Day After." Despite the decline in the salience of this area during the weeks after the show, we cannot discount the possibility that had it not been for the grim specter on television its place on the national agenda might have been still lower.

ABC broadcast its two-hour drama during a period of heightened public concern about international tension. With the backdrop of Central America, Lebanon, halted arms talks, and verbal warfare with Moscow, "The Day After" would seem to have been aired with precise timing. This context makes its failure to noticeably influence attitudes all the more noteworthy. Before turning to explanations for this phenomenon, we will review our efforts to detect any behavioral changes.

BEHAVIOR

Except for the increased reluctance to link Ronald Reagan to nuclear war, there was no evidence of even minor movement in opinions toward defense policy and nuclear war. However, it is possible that "The Day After" reinforced the intensity of public sentiment and stimulated a zealous minority to action. Thus, rather than confine our analysis entirely to reported attitudes we examined public behavior as well.

We investigated public responses toward (1) ABC and its affiliate stations, (2) the White House, (3) the Congress, (4) psychological counseling services, and (5) anti-nuclear groups such as Ground Zero. If "The Day After" -- though not changing opinions -- did mobilize viewers into action, we should have ample measures of such behavior.

ABC and affiliates. ABC estimated that fewer than 8,711 calls were received at network offices in New York and Los Angeles. That was fewer than, for example, the 12,000 calls

received about "The Thornbirds," but exceeded the 1,066 calls received one evening when "Dynasty" was preempted. On the evening of the broadcast until 11:30 p.m., 63 percent of the calls in New York and 72 percent in Los Angeles were supportive of the program.

Local affiliates received relatively few calls and a higher share of complaints. Chicago recorded 460 telephone calls, and 51 percent of those who expressed an opinion were hostile. The tally in various other cities: Milwaukee, 115 calls, 22 percent negative; Washington, D.C., 102 calls, 59 percent negative; Dallas, 85 calls, 94 percent negative; and Nashville, 15 calls, 67 percent negative.

Despite the controversy surrounding "The Day After," there was no outpouring of telephone calls, pro or con, to ABC stations. Those who did call were disproportionately more critical of the program than was, according to our sample, the national viewing audience. At least as far as this small indicator of behavior goes, it suggests that "The Day After" stimulated its critics more than its proponents.

The White House. A modest response was also tallied at the White House. Joan Ducain, director of the White House Comments Office, maintained a count of the number of calls received and instructed that each caller be asked: "Do you think Ronald Reagan is doing a good job in trying to reduce the prospect of nuclear war?"

Within 24 hours after the broadcast, the White House got only 596 telephone calls. (Of these calls, 77 percent said they believed the President was "doing a good job" in this area.) By comparison, the White House recorded 4,592 calls following the President's October 26th speech on Grenada and Lebanon.

Once again, "The Day After" did not seem to energize an anti-nuclear weapons constituency. Of course, they may well have seen little point in ringing the White House or ABC. Better targets may have been seen in the Congress and other activity may have been channeled toward anti-nuclear groups.

Congress. Many people in the mailrooms on Capital Hill believe they see the tides of public opinion in the ebb and flow of mail sent to Senators and Representatives. At least they may have an indicator of opinion intensity, whether organized or spontaneous.

Pegging their campaign to "The Day After," a coalition of 30 groups opposed to nuclear arms sponsored television and newspaper ads promoting a toll-free number to call for "Nuclear War Prevention Kits." The kits stressed the importance and techniques of writing members of Congress. With these efforts added to an audience of over 80 million, what happened to Congressional mailboxes following "The Day After?"

We surveyed the correspondence staffs of 21 Senators and 30 Representatives, selecting a wide variety of office-holders from all parts of the country, and from the liberal, moderate, and conservative wings of both the Democratic and Republican parties. Most offices maintain records of mail trends, and we asked for comparisons of the mail received on defense policy, arms control, and nuclear war for the week before and the week after November 20th.

The nearly unanimous response was that there was no outpouring of mail in the ten day period following "The Day After." Supervisors in almost all of the offices said they observed no before-and-after difference, and that the volume of mail on these subjects was not inordinately high either week.

Workers in several offices said that given the movie's advance billing they had expected to be innundated with mail and were surprised that there was so little. In some offices, arrangements had been made for extra interns to handle promptly the anticipated deluge; as it turned out, they were not needed.

The only office in which we were told there had been a jump in nuclear weapons-related mail was that of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-N.H.). Senator Leahy had an increase of nearly 100 pieces of mail.

It is not clear why this one office reported results at variance the others. But it is clear that "The Day After" did not inspire a flood of letters and telegrams to Washington.

One other Washington office which unnecessarily geared up to receive the public was the Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA was ready with extra staff to handle calls. Three "Day After-related" calls were counted on Monday, and another four on Tuesday.

Anti-nuclear groups. One of the leading groups in the general anti-nuclear area is Ground Zero. Theo Brown, its director, told us his organization experienced an extremely small increase in mail in the period after November 20th, and only a minor increase in donations.

Brown's own conclusion was that "The Day After" was too antiseptic, too apolitical, and, having been oversold in advance, too anticlimatic to be influential. Nevertheless, Brown believed the program helped focus public attention on the subject, and saw that as its "greatest contribution."

People in other anti-nuclear groups who consented to give us information told a similar story. The Lawyers Alliance for Nuclear Arms Control received only 2 or 3 extra calls at the national headquarters in Boston. The Alliance did not experience any upturn in donations until the end of December -- an increase attributable to the IRS not ABC.

Psychological aid. Much was made in the press about the potentially disturbing consequences of viewing "The Day After." Concern was expressed that vulnerable individuals might be depressed and emotionally upset by the show. To check this final issue, we surveyed mental health hotlines.

Did people telephone hotlines to talk about their problems coping with the trauma of "The Day After"? A survey of long-established hotlines in the Washington, D.C., area found little or no reaction to the program. Psychologists and psychiatrists appear to have spent far more time talking to television station reporters than to disturbed patients.

INTENSITY, INNOCULATION, ENERVATION, AND ENNUI

Aside from the increased reluctance to link Reagan with nuclear war, "The Day After" produced no significant evidence of changed attitudes or behavior. It was neither the salvation nor subversion the left and right had claimed it would be. Why did it have so little influence on its viewers?

There appear to be four possible explanations: First, the controversy surrounding the program might have "immunized" many viewers so that they would be on guard against new ideas. Second, the special "Viewpoint" discussion immediately following "The Day After" may have mitigated some of its influence. Third, attitudes may have already been so strongly held that they were unlikely to be swayed by a two-hour show. Fourth, "The Day After" may have been more soporific than shattering, and a dull show would hardly be unsettling, no matter how much Hollywood hype had preceded it.

Innoculation. The week leading up to the ABC broadcast had been filled with news stories about the controversial show. Jerry Falwell and Phyllis Schafly lead the attack. Mushroom-cloud cover stories were featured in magazines such as Newsweek and TV Guide. Television shows, like "Nightline," "Sixty Minutes," and morning news shows, featured defenders and detractors of the forthcoming spectacle. Anti-nuclear groups mobilized to profit from what they hoped would be a windfall of anti-nuclear outrage. In this atmosphere, many viewers might have set up extra perceptual barriers to resist being influenced.

To measure suspicions about "The Day After," we asked the following question: "Do you think that the movie about nuclear war is going to be politically fair or do you think it will be mainly propoganda?" (Past tense was used in the posttest version.)

TABLE 6: "THE DAY AFTER" AS "PROPAGANDA" OR "FAIR"

	Pretest	Posttest
Propaganda	25.5	19.6
Uncertain	34.1	17.2
Fair	40.4	63.2

(Prob. < .0001)

Attitudes toward the movie itself did change before and after its presentation. Only a modest plurality of 40 percent were willing say in advance that they were confident the show would be fair. On the other hand, one-quarter of the audience said they expected the movie to be "mainly propoganda." Despite our forced-choice question, over one-third insisted they were reserving judgment -- they would wait and see for themselves.

After seeing "The Day After," the proportion who said it was "politically fair" grew from 40 to 63 percent. At the same time, the share saying it was "propaganda" shrunk from 26 to 20 percent. The fraction who were undecided was cut in half, although 17 percent of the respondents still would not characterize the movie even after having seen it. (See Table 6.)

These figures fall short of being a resounding endorsement, but they do show substantial movement toward considering the program fair. Probably, most or all of those who said they had just watched a propagandistic show had already decided so in advance; there was certainly no increase in their numbers after the show. Nonetheless, one-quarter of the audience was primed to expect a loaded political message, and about one-third was at least prepared to find it slanted ("wait and see").

To examine whether this wary viewership limited the persuasive effects of "The Day After," we first threw out those who labelled the movie "propaganda" and looked for attitude change among the balance of the audience. Once again, even using a generous .10 level of probability, there were no statistically significant differences before and after the movie on any of the five defense and nuclear questions. Even among those presumably most open to the movie there were no signs of change.

We tried another variation on this approach. We separately analyzed the before-and-after responses of those who had called the movie "fair," "propaganda," or were undecided. Again at the .05 level of probability, we were unable to find traces of opinion shifts. At the .10 level, there was only one marginally significant relationship: Those who said the movie was propaganda were somewhat more optimistic about their prospects for surviving a nuclear war after witnessing "The Day After." (See Table 7.)

TABLE 7: OPINIONS ON CHANCES OF SURVIVING A NUCLEAR WAR BY RESPONDENTS WHO SAID "THE DAY AFTER" WAS "PROPAGANDA"

	Pretest	Posttest
Good or 50/50	13.0	24.4
Poor or no chance at all	83.1	68.3
Uncertain	3.8	7.3

(Prob. < .09)

Paradoxically, one of the few intimations of attitude change came from those most skeptical of the drama. Apparently, some of them seized on the picture of life after war (instead of instant annihilation) to become more encouraged about their own odds of survival.

Aside from this ironic twist, the broader finding here was that the movie's failure to induce attitude shifts could not be easily attributed to 100 million people all having their defenses up. The less skeptical portion of the audience gave even less hint of change than did the critics.

Nightline. If the conservative brigade did not torpedo the movie before it was shown, did Ted Koppel's platoon shoot it down immediately after it was shown? Consistent with national TV ratings, nearly three-fourths of those surveyed stayed tuned

after the end of "The Day After" to watch a special "Viewpoint" edition of "Nightline." They first heard Secretary of State George Shultz minimize the prospect of nuclear war. Then they heard an assortment of mostly former government officials debate deterrance theory and defense strategies. (Some wags called the discussion "more frightening" than the movie.)

Previous research has demonstrated that the "coda effects" of subsequent commentaries can blunt the effects of a televised documentary (Robinson, 1976) and that "instant analysis" can also dissipate the mood and impact of a presidential address (Paletz and Vinegar, 1977). Might the "Viewpoint" discussion have similarly undercut the power of "The Day After"?

Contrasting the opinions of those who did and those who did not watch "Viewpoint" failed to uncover significant differences. For example, 11 percent of those watching the roundtable wanted unilateral nuclear disarmament; among those not watching the proportion was nearly identical (10 percent). In both groups, 36 percent said the United States spends too much money on defense.

The "Viewpoint" and the "non-Viewpoint" groups were quite comparable in terms of age, education, sex, and party identification. They differed significantly in only one respect: Logically enough, those who tuned out "Viewpoint" were twice as likely to believe they had no influence on the issue of war and peace; 41 percent of this group took the "no influence" position. Only 21 percent of those who bothered to listen to Henry Kissinger, Carl Sagan, Robert McNamara, and Ted Koppel believed they personally had no influence on the subject.

We searched for some influence of "Viewpoint" using one other approach. Having coded the minute each interview began, it was possible to calculate how long each person had been watching the discussion. We were unable to find any association between length of viewing and opinions on defense and nuclear issues. Had "Viewpoint" had some mitigating effect, one would have expected differences among those who had just tuned in and those who had watched for a half-hour or so.

Intensity. Neither conservative attacks on "The Day After" nor "Viewpoint" discussions of it explained the absence of opinion change. What then about that usual bulwark against change -- intensely-held attitudes? A truism verified by decades of communication research is that strong, long-held opinions do not yield easily to change.

Many of those who anticipated profound consequences acted as if "The Day After" would drive home the horror of nuclear war to an American public that was otherwise indifferent or naive on the subject. Quite to the contrary, several decades of public opinion polls suggest that Americans have a long-standing appre-

ciation of the destruction and death that would result from nuclear war. They strongly endorse efforts for mutual U.S-Soviet limits and reductions of nuclear arms. It is true that Americans object to the unilateral weakening of U.S. power, but they reason that it would be an invitation to aggression and would increase chances of war. (See Adams, 1983.)

In 1956, Gallup asked people to estimate how many Americans out of every 10 would die in a nuclear war. The median response was that 7 in 10 would be killed. For nearly three decades Americans had not been sanguine about the outcome of nuclear conflict.

Respondents also exhibited little naivete in estimating their own personal chances of survival. In 1963, using the survival categories "very good, just 50-50, or poor," Gallup found only 9 percent in the optimistic category and a plurality of 47 percent in the "poor" column. The latter category has steadily grown in subsequent Gallup polls.

Americans have embraced arms control proposals as surely as they have acknowledged the dangers of nuclear warfare. Overwhelming and immediate public support greeted the idea of a nuclear freeze. Almost no matter how the question is phrased, 70 to 85 percent of the public will voice support for a mutual freeze on nuclear weapons.

Once again, this is not a recent development. In 1958, Gallup asked citizens if they favored "setting up a world organization which would make sure, by regular inspection, that no nation, including Russia and the United States, makes hydrogen bombs, atomic bombs and missles." Seventy percent of the respondents favored this mutual, verifiable freeze in atomic armaments and only 16 percent opposed the idea. Americans are not recent converts to the goal of halting the arms race. (3)

Even though our national survey was directed solely at the adults who were watching "The Day After," rather than toward all adults, these past findings are germane. They indicate that Americans had not been oblivious to the threat of nuclear war and were historically sympathetic to arms control. In dramatizing the anguish of the aftermath of nuclear war, "The Day After" did not tell its audience anything new.

Ennui. Along with the factor of prior convictions, one other major explanation can be offered: "The Day After" was not as sensational and heart-rending as its promotions had promised.

Given the magnitude of violence in popular entertainment and a decade of disaster movies, "The Day After" had tough acts to follow. Moreover, its depiction of the aftermath of World War III appeared to have been less horrible, less gruesome than many viewers had imagined. Some authorities also argued that the

movie's images were optimistic compared to the likely consequences of a worldwide rain of nuclear warheads. ABC conceded as much with a printed coda stating that its scenario was "in all likelihood less severe than what would actually occur."

CONCLUSION

"The Day After" achieved the third largest audience of any dramatic program in television history. It did not however achieve any of the influence many people had hoped or feared it would. ABC's movie did not create the hysteria of "War of the Worlds," the dramatic impact of "Roots," or the political influence of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The best available evidence indicated that "The Day After" was undermined neither by the pre-movie controversy over its political slant nor by the post-movie panel discussion on ABC's "Viewpoint." Two other explanations were more persuasive.

First, Americans already had a longstanding tradition of support for mutual arms limits and opposition to unilateral reductions, and have, for the past three decades, seen nuclear war as the ultimate cataclysm. Second, "The Day After" proved to be less than a searing message on the folly of the arms race.

Unexpectedly, the one marked change associated with the broadcast of the movie was the reduced willingness to link President Reagan with nuclear war. This suggests that "The Day After" simulated a rally-round-the-flag occasion more powerfully than it conveyed anti-nuclear arms sentiments. This finding serves as a strong reminder that unanticipated public interpretations can create unanticipated consequences and, at the same time, deflate exaggerated expectations.

"The Day After" did not change attitudes toward defense armaments or nuclear war. It did not induce psychic numbing in its audience. It did not mobilize a new anti-nuclear weapons crusade. It did not stir any measurable anti-nuclear shifts in American attitudes or in American behavior.

ENDNOTES

(1)

Even at the .10 level, there were only three statistically significant relationships. After the program, those without any college education were somewhat more optimistic about their chances of surviving a nuclear war; the share supposing they had "no chance at all" declined from 48 to 39 percent (prob. < .07). (There was no shift among college-educated viewers -- 46-47 percent said "no chance" each time.)

The other two marginally significant relationships involved the interaction of age and unilateral nuclear disarmament. Younger adults (17-29 yrs.) showed higher levels of support for scrapping "all U.S. nuclear weapons -- regardless of what the Soviet Union does" after the movie (19 percent) than before it (12 percent; sig. < .09). Conversely, older adults interviewed after the movie were even more supportive of a nuclear deterrant, and the proportion approving unilateral nuclear disarmament shrunk from 12 to 6 percent (sig. < .09).

As interesting as these three instances of borderline statistical significance appear, we should resist overinterpreting them. Merely by chance, one would expect to find 5 out of 54 tables to be significant at the .10 level. What can be inferred with reasonable confidence, however, is the absence of any important pattern of effects among particular subgroups.

(2)

Similar findings appeared in two Washington Post polls which asked if "Reagan's handling of foreign affairs is increasing or decreasing the chances for war?" Results from the poll of November 3-5 showed 57 percent saying Reagan was increasing chances of war. The poll taken the day following "The Day After" produced a major drop of 14 percentage points -- only 43 percent remained critical of Reagan for increasing chances of war.

(3)

Nearly fifty years earlier, Americans also gave strong support to proposals for arms control. In 1937, Gallup found that 79 percent favored a mutual reduction in "spending for armaments" and 66 percent favored a "world disarmament conference."

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